

FRANCESCO PAOLO MICHETTI (1851 - 1929):



There is a *fil rouge* running through the entire pictorial parable of Francesco Paolo Michetti, one of the leading protagonists of the Italian and international art scene between the 1870s and the first decades of the new century, and it is the cognitive and experimental attitude that, on that borderline between verist instances and symbolist culture, soon led him to cross the threshold of reality in search of its mysterious and eternal essence.

Michetti's story unfolds in a cosmopolitan dimension that takes place mainly between Abruzzo, Naples, Rome and Paris, but in the background there are also London and America, where his works are frequently exhibited and widely collected. His art thus developed right from the start in a close confrontation with the most up-to-date trends of his time.

Having arrived in Naples in 1867 at the age of 16 from Abruzzo to study at the Institute of Fine Arts, Michetti soon left the academic halls. The realism of the Palizzi brothers and his fascination



with the vitality of nature were his first starting points. In tune with the research of other Neapolitans, in particular the painters of the Resina school, Michetti preferred to paint in the open air, first in the Capodimonte woods, then, encouraged by Edoardo Dalbono, he turned to that unspoilt world that was Abruzzo at the end of the 19th century, destined to become, with its peasant and pastoral traditions, his main source of stimuli.

In 1871, the artist signed a contract with the German merchant Friedrich Reitlinger, in Naples in search of young talent, and in the same year he was in Paris for the first time. His stay in Paris and, in particular, his acquaintance with the painting of the Spaniard Mariano Fortuny, a true star of the moment, and, through him, with the language of Japanese prints, very much in vogue in the French capital, were decisive in steering Michetti's initial naturalism towards a new direction. Michetti understood the technical novelties of Fortuny's painting, assimilated the boldness of the cuts, the two-dimensionality of the representation, the pure colours, and his painting changed, becoming a rapid and highly refined painting of touch that casually alternated finished parts with others of extreme formal and chromatic fragmentation. It is therefore on the basis of the examples provided by the Spanish master that Michetti declines his pastoral imagery in more dreamlike, poetic, light, and consequently more abstract terms, developing a manner destined to be extraordinarily successful on the international market. From the mid-1970s, the artist then began to flank his rural and pastoral themes with the representation of the rites and popular traditions of Abruzzo, whose main moments such as weddings, festivals and processions are intensely felt in their ancient and ancestral soul, in their universal value, while on the technical front, his desire to take possession of reality in the singularity of each impression led him to use tempera and pastel more and more frequently in his studies, very effective in stopping the fleetingness of reality and rendering that spontaneity that made the French critic Louis Énault call him "un Manet italien". Tempera, in particular, is diluted with a glue-based preparation to obtain effects of greater luminosity and transparency that give the images the freshness of the snapshot. It was the artist himself, who at the same time, with an experimental attitude, explored the multiple possibilities of the photographic medium, who defined his works



as "snapshots" It is in this context that his production of country landscapes and seascapes, very copious between the 1980s and the first decade of the new century, should be considered. They are all sheets of similar size, sometimes executed only in pastel, sometimes with the addition of interventions in tempera and pencil. A series of 'snapshots', sometimes real zooms on details, in which the land of Abruzzo is revealed in all its many aspects: the reflections of light on the waters of the Adriatic, in particular around the rocks of Ortona, the protagonists of one of his happiest works, *Impression on the Adriatic* (Milan, Galleria d'Arte Moderna); the hill with Francavilla al Mare in the background, where the artist has lived since 1878; the skies furrowed by broad clouds above the boundless horizon of the sea; the countryside with its stony paths; the gnarled profile of olive trees; the majesty of the Majella at sunset; the Orfento river flanked by rocks.

Michetti uses coloured supports - mostly brown or grey - and often leaves them uncovered, thus exploiting the colour of the background, and by varying the inclination and pressure of the pastel, using the porosity of the paper for pictorial purposes, intervening at times with scrapings and scratches, at times with subtle hatching or with quick touches and twisting of colour, he succeeds in capturing luminous vibrations and fleeting impressions of the environment with the utmost immediacy. The landscape is stripped of all anecdotal and narrative elements, the forms unravel into vaporous and abstract atmospheres, extraordinarily evocative in the indefiniteness of the details, they become palpitating and mysterious visions.

These pastels are not conceived as simple sketches, preparatory works for paintings of greater commitment, but, an important fact for the time, as accomplished and autonomous works. In fact, from 1881 onwards, on several occasions the artist presented them together with other figure and animal studies in tempera and pastel, often with painted frames and enriched with plastic inserts such as flowers, words, stars and musical notes. Personally taking care of the installation, Michetti saturated the walls of the rooms in order to create a true immersive and multi-sensorial experience that allowed viewers to be catapulted into the luminous, sensual and primitive physicality of the Adriatic region, captured in the mutability of its atmospheric



conditions, a continuum of images where figures and landscape constituted the different moments of a single reality, elusive and in perennial becoming. This was a quest that, due to the unfinished nature of his works, did not fail to attract much criticism, but was always supported by his friend Gabriele d'Annunzio, who had been working with Michetti since 1880 in a close communion of intentions and spirit. For years, the Vate shared with him and the sculptor Costantino Barbella, the musician Francesco Paolo Tosti and the artist and musician Paolo De Cecco a singular experience of a cultural coterie in which, under the banner of the total work of art, precious affinities between sounds, colours, words and forms were pursued. In 1883, he thus expressed himself about Michetti's pastels:

"And in the heavens what a mystery of clouds, what a fantastic people of forms! It was like the great poem of light And all the sweetest transparencies, all the finest tenderness of the reflections, all the liveliest flames of colour, and the sudden changes, and the most daring contrasts, and the opalescence and glitter had stopped the pastel" .

Moreover, on several occasions d'Annunzio would emphasise in his friend's work the peculiarity of a research that went far beyond the mere representation of reality, arriving, in the passage from 'seeing' to 'vision', at an idea of art as cognitive experience:

Thus he wrote, for example, in an article published in the magazine "Il Convito":

"By the assiduity of contemplation, his sight little by little changed into deep and continuous vision. Through the assiduity of meditating, his mind has gradually acquired a virtue that penetrates and knows the soul of things" .

Michetti's research with his landscape pastels presents extraordinary points of contact with that of another of the great protagonists of international art between the two centuries, James Abbott McNeill Whistler. An American by birth, Whistler carried out his artistic career between London and Paris, where in the 1860s he had established himself with elegant compositions in which the tradition of English portraiture met Oriental art and was thus declined in a synthetic and evocative painting, whose assonance with music was emphasised by the artist through his choice



of titles. In 1879, Whistler had been the protagonist of a clamorous court case that, in the name of freedom of artistic expression, had seen him pitted against John Ruskin, one of the most influential art critics of the time, who had compared his *Nocturne in Black and Gold. The falling rocket* to a bucket of paint thrown in the public's face. Having won the case but impoverished by court costs, Whistler repaired to Venice where, paid by the Fine Art Society, he stayed to work for 14 months, producing twelve etchings and almost a hundred pastels. The latter are so similar in concept and technique to those produced by Michetti in the same period that a direct contact between the two artists working on the shores of the Adriatic a few hundred kilometres apart cannot be ruled out. Moreover, Whistler too, having returned to London, exhibited his pastels as completed works in 1881, as did Michetti, and exhibited them all together crowding the walls in a display he personally curated, obviously not failing to draw the strides of many critics of the time.

This evocative and non-descriptive conception of the landscape expressed through the pastel technique, which places Michetti in line with the experiences of international artistic culture between the two centuries, will have its main heir in Italy in one of the great protagonists of the Symbolist season, Giulio Aristide Sartorio, who will give Michetti the merit of having steered him towards landscape, placing his box of pastels in his hands. "By instinct I have never thought of myself as a pupil of anyone," Sartorio wrote, "and if ideas of freedom and vision I owe to anyone, I owe them to Michetti more than to others" .

Michetti would continue his production of pastels up to the threshold of the 20th century, in a thirty-year period studded with the creation of major works such as *Il voto* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea), *La figlia di Jorio* (Pescara, Palazzo della Provincia) or *Le Serpi e Gli Storpi* (Francavilla al Mare, Museo Michetti) that would make him one of the most celebrated masters between the two centuries.

In his last period of activity, the elderly artist, now deliberately detached from exhibition and market reasons, developed his pictorial research in increasingly experimental terms,



interweaving it with experiments in optics, physics, mechanics and cinematography, in a feverish pursuit of the secret laws of life. With a palette reduced to monochrome, favouring the use of tempera diluted with glycerine, the painting frees itself in brushstrokes with a strong abstracting value, capable of uniting figures and landscape in a fluid, elusive and seamless reality, to capture what he feels is the immutable substance of reality. A quest in which the artist, indifferent to success, will assert his very modern autonomy of vision with results that appear to be absolutely anticipatory of some of the experiences of the 20th century avant-gardes.

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L. Énault, *L'Exposition de Milan*, in “Le Figaro”, 20 luglio 1881.

G. d'Annunzio, *Ricordi francavillesi. Frammento autobiografico*, in “Fanfulla della Domenica”, 7 gennaio 1883.

G. d'Annunzio, *Nota su Francesco Paolo Michetti*, in “Il Convito”, 1896, 8, pp. 583-584.

Giulio Aristide Sartorio all'autore del libro, in T. Sillani, *Francesco Paolo Michetti*, Milano-Roma, Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1932, p. 117.

